Chinese media will overstate the impact of Xi Jinping’s first state visit to the United States and American commentators will carp about the failure to resolve intractable issues, but the visit scored a number of significant achievements. For months before the visit, commentary in both countries—and many others—had described U.S.-China relations as tense, fraught, and fragile. Some predicted that the summit would “fail” and might even be cancelled; others saw it as a last-ditch attempt to salvage a deeply troubled relationship. Both camps exaggerated the problems and underestimated the will and ability of leaders from both countries to address divisive issues without allowing specific disagreements to preclude cooperation and commitments on other matters.

The summit, which should be understood as a process rather than just the meetings and events of the past few days, did not remove the remaining obstacles to conclusion of the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) desired by American firms, and it did not produce concrete and verifiable measures to end the cyber-theft of intellectual property. The former might have been possible but the latter was not and no one should use the failure to achieve what was impossible to prove that the summit had failed or that the relationship is in a downward spiral. Indeed, it appears that the pre-summit push to conclude the BIT—and the concerns conveyed during Xi’s meetings with business leaders in Seattle—may lead to early resolution of the remaining issues.

Cyber-theft is arguably the most important issue on the bilateral agenda, both because of the magnitude and significance to intellectual property stolen from U.S. (and other foreign) firms, and its significance as an indicator of whether China sees its future as part of the rule-based international order or as an opportunistic predator. Given the importance of the issues subsumed under the “cyber” umbrella, several developments during Xi’s visit are noteworthy.

One such notable development was Xi’s clear statement that China is committed to reform and improve the global order from which it has benefitted and to which it has contributed. This commitment to the rule-based international order was reinforced by other statements in Seattle pledging to protect intellectual property and provide open and transparent legal environment. Xi also affirmed, in Seattle and in Washington, D.C., that the Chinese government would not engage in or encourage cyber theft of intellectual property. Many will complain that Xi’s words are mere rhetoric with no verifiable mechanism to ensure implementation. But the fact that the President of China is now on record eschewing Chinese government tolerance of cyber-theft and the establishment of a joint mechanism to address alleged instances of such theft is significant and provides additional leverage for the United States to work the problem. It is also noteworthy that whereas in Seattle Xi described both commercial theft and hacking of government networks as criminal offenses, the joint statement issued in Washington mentions only cyber theft of intellectual property.

The two presidents also committed to mitigate malicious cyber activity from their national territory and to refrain from targeting critical infrastructure in peacetime. The former is more
significant than the latter (but of course the proof of significance will be how—and how quickly—it is implemented), but the restraint on cyber targeting of infrastructure brings this part of the U.S.-China cyber relationship within the purview of the United Nations and is a step toward the establishment of an international control regime for cyberspace. Such a regime is badly needed and would be a concrete example of how the United States and China can work together, and with others, to update the global order to address 21st century challenges.

Declared willingness to work together in the multilateral arena to address global challenges was arguably the most important component of the agreements on climate change-related issues. The presidents built on the agreements announced last November to proclaim a common vision for the upcoming Paris meeting on climate change. Taken together, these statements and associated actions mark a dramatic reversal of the antagonistic positions espoused in Copenhagen and send a strong signal to the international community that China and the United States are prepared to cooperate on climate change issues. The message to others is that they no longer need fear that their own efforts will be negated by disagreement between the two largest producers of greenhouse gases, and that they can no longer excuse their own inaction by claims that any potential international agreement on climate change would be vetoed by either China or the United States. The message is — it is time to get serious.

As with all international agreements and statements of intent, we will not know how important any of the agreements announced during the visit are until we see how they are implemented. Rather than carp about the failure to adopt detailed and binding commitments, however, we should recognize and applaud the fact that the state of U.S.-China relations is less fraught and more future-focused than pessimists maintain.